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SUBJECT: LABOR LEADER JAN SITHOLE: SWAZILAND NOT UPHOLDING LABOR RIGHTS, WORKERS NEED CIVIC EDUCATION

¶1. SUMMARY: Labor union and civil society leader Jan Sithole, who recently stepped down after 25 years as secretary general of the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU), told PolOff that Swaziland is not doing well implementing treaties and laws upholding labor rights. Recalling influential AFL-CIO education efforts in Swaziland in the 90s, he stated that today's Swazi workers need additional civic education, particularly those within the informal economy. Government and chieftdom use of patronage, including threats to take land or restrict scholarships of troublemakers and their families, and statements that reforms would be anti-Swazi culture, hinder current civic education efforts. END SUMMARY.

¶2. On December 18, labor union and civil society leader Jan Sithole, who recently stepped down after 25 years as secretary general of SFTU, Swaziland's syndication of trade unions, told PolOff that Swaziland is not doing well implementing treaties and laws that uphold labor rights. He cited government restrictions that prevent police and security forces from unionizing, even though the International Labor Organization (ILO) had raised the issue of unionization with the GKOS as long as 15 years ago. When the Constitution was finalized in 2005, it prohibited security forces from unionizing, though Sithole said it could have simply outlawed security forces from striking in order to ensure public services and order.

¶3. The civil society leader raised concerns over the Public Services bill currently before Parliament, which, if passed, would prohibit civil servants from membership in political organizations, despite the fact that the Constitution provides for freedom of expression and association. Observers fear GKOS would use this law to fire government employees with ties to political parties and affiliations. The Prime Minister was quoted in the media some months ago that, indeed, this is the intent. GKOS's international obligations also require legislation affecting labor to first go before the tripartite Labor Advisory Board, made up of representatives from employers, workers, and government, something this proposed legislation had not done.

Labor More Powerful in 90s, Swazis Need Civic Education

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¶4. Sithole agreed with the observation that labor had more political clout in the 1990s, when strikes and work-stoppages helped shut down the economy and forced the government to begin the political reforms that led to a new constitution. He indicated that labor is weaker now because the media is more restricted and censored today, and as a result of the economic downturn there are fewer jobs, fewer union members, and fewer unionized work places.

Sithole also cited education efforts by the AFL-CIO in the 1990s as instrumental in teaching members about their rights. He emphasized that today's Swazi workers and populace, particularly within the informal economy, need civic education like that which the AFL-CIO provided, and he and others in civil society are pushing a campaign to do just that. He expressed concern that government has been successful in limiting civic education campaigns, using a patronage system to reward persons who speak against reform. One common tool of chiefs in charge of land and scholarships is to evaluate how well

a family is toeing the traditional/royal line when doling out favors. He indicated that GKOS has effectively used the "culture" argument in discrediting progressive reforms as unpatriotic to Swazi culture.

15. Regarding the economic crisis and looming budget crisis following the decline in Swaziland's SACU receipts, Sithole stated that GKOS has not reached out to labor or civil society for solutions or even collaboration.

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